12 Humbert de Superville: Representing Theory

EDWARD GRASMAN

If this contribution wants to shed light on anything, it is on the unpredictable character of Humbert de Superville. Being a man who was capable of radically changing his views, it is risky to expect any great consistency in him. As this aspect of him has never been considered in the literature on Humbert, he has generally been regarded as someone who adhered to the same ideas all his life. The purpose of this article is certainly also to caution against such a presupposition.

Humbert's international reputation rests mainly on two feats. The first is the body of drawings he made after early Trecento paintings in Italy at the end of the eighteenth century, that is to say at the beginning of his career. The second is his *Essai sur les signes inconditionnels dans l'art*, the first edition of which appeared more than twenty-five years after his Italian sojourn, in 1827. The *Essai* is based on the revolutionary hypothesis that nature, including man, is characterized by what Humbert called absolute signs, lines and colours which cannot fail to have specific effects on the viewer.

In the literature on Humbert his early drawings are frequently cited as evidence that he was among the first artists to feel a deep appreciation for early Italian art, an appreciation which he would communicate decades later in his *Essai*.[1] The correlation between Humbert's drawings in Italy on the one hand and his much later text on the other indeed presents itself, but the question remains whether it allows us to draw this conclusion. Wasn't he too unpredictable to justify our assumption of so much consistency?

David Pierre Giottin Humbert de Superville was born as David Pierre Humbert. From 1789 to 1800 he lived in Italy, where he made two journeys to study early artworks. Afterwards he sided with the French in the conflict between the French Republic and the Vatican, as a result of which he was taken prisoner and held captive in Civitavecchia for almost a year. He signed the drawings which he made during his imprisonment with *Giottino Humbert f.*, Little Giotto [made it]. In 1816, having long returned to the Netherlands, he had it notarized that he had been commonly known as David Pierre Giottin Humbert de Superville since 1810 – de Superville after his grandmother.[2] These facts provide clues for his constant appreciation for and identification with early Italian painters. Yet if his appreciation was really that constant, why did he then ask the engraver Tommaso Piroli to donate his drawings after early Italian painting to the neo-classicist painter and author Giuseppe Bossi, after whose death in 1815 they ended up in Venice?[3] Although Humbert obsessively made notes that are very diverse in character, anything autobiographical is lacking. We do not even know whether he made drawings after the work of early Italians of his own accord or whether he was professionally involved in Seroux d'Agincourt's initiative to reproduce artworks that had been created between the fourth and the fourteenth centuries. In the first case

12a
Apollo Belvedere,
pen and brown ink,
PK-T-1290.

12b
Dionysus Sardanapalus or Indian Bacchus,
pen and brown ink,
PK-T-1274.

we may assume he developed an affinity with early painting while in Italy, in the second case as much as, or better: as little as Seroux himself.

In Italy Humbert also studied Raphael, but the following passages from his *Essai* suggest that by then he held the view that Raphael's later work also marked the endpoint of the development of early Italian art: 'Painting, which had witnessed such a promising rebirth in the thirteenth century, had succumbed to immense adversity – in Italy as a result of the discovery and study of classical sculpture, in the North as a result of the Reformation.' 'Oh', Humbert sighed elsewhere, 'how wonderful it would have been had Raphael never laid eyes on classical sculptures or reliefs'. To Humbert, the fatal impact of Classical Antiquity was particularly evident in Raphael's frescos after the fable of Psyche in the Villa Farnesina in Rome.[4] In 1830, at a time when he was busy preparing a second edition of the *Essai*, Humbert presented Caspar Reuvens, the Leiden Professor of Archaeology, with his studies after Raphael and classical sculptures. He had finally received them back the previous year after having been deprived of them in Italy.[5] If we can interpret this gift as a confirmation of Humbert's declining interest in Raphael, shouldn't we suspect something similar in the case of his earlier present to Bossi? Would that gift

not also point to a waning appreciation, only in this case of early Italian painting and then apparently of a temporary character?

An outspoken example of Humbert's unpredictability is his attitude towards the *Apollo Belvedere*. In 1822 Humbert had been elected a member of the Koninklijk-Nederlandsch Instituut van Wetenschappen, Letterkunde en Schoone Kunsten (Royal Institute of Sciences, Literature and Fine Arts), KNI for short. At a meeting of the KNI in 1824 he delivered a lecture with the title: *Coup d'Oeil sur l'Apollon du Belvedere.* In the opening sentences he characterized the *Apollo Belvedere* as an amphibious masterpiece, somewhere in between sculpture and painting (Fig. 12a). It was the only statue from Antiquity, Humbert argued, that did justice to the dignity of man and opened man's eyes to himself, filling him with self-esteem and joy in his own existence. The statue had the vertical position that made man first among the animals, while the figure which showed itself in its full height was crowned by a superb head. The left arm was nobly extended, representing the horizontal element, the sign of equilibrium and calm. Together with the shoulders, this arm formed a triangle with the right foot as its base, while the right arm descending in an oblique line solemnly suggested the completion of 'a great action' (Pl. 12.5 and 12.6). Human nature was superior to other life forms, a temple of God and, Humbert continued, to us the *Apollo Belvedere* was the image of that temple. Unlike all other statues from Antiquity which, however harmonious their proportions might be, did not result in the slightest uplifting of man, the *Apollo Belvedere* embodied the mystery of art as a medium to make man aware of his intellectual and moral superiority. It made him raise himself up and his arms became like wings. Dixit Humbert in 1824.[6]

In the *Essai* that was published three years later, however, his praise was far more restrained. Perhaps we cannot even speak of praise when he says: 'For even the statue of the *Apollo Belvedere* fails, seeing that its shadow, when properly projected on that wall, even surpasses the actual source that produced it with respect to moral value (*valeur morale*)'.[7] That the shadow surpasses the statue itself, can hardly be called praise. No longer does the *Apollo Belvedere* have the power to literally and figuratively elevate man. Humbert now exclusively reserved his praise for another classical statue: 'Following my principles, the statue of the Indian Bacchus (*Bacchus Indien*) or Lawgiver, is without doubt the finest of all classical statues in the collection of the Vatican.'[8] The contrast could hardly be greater, because whereas the *Apollo Belvedere* is gracefulness itself, the *Indian Bacchus* is all massiveness (Fig. 12b). Yet Humbert, both in his lecture of 1824, as in the *Essai* of 1827, employed the same absolute signs as criteria.

Within the absolute signs, Humbert distinguished horizontal lines, obliquely ascending lines (expansives) and obliquely descending lines. The horizontal lines expressed equilibrium and calm, the expansive lines joy and movement, the obliquely descending lines sorrow. His criticism of Raphael's *Transfiguration* may serve as an example of what this view entailed for Humbert (cf. Pl. 5.17). He regarded this painting as Raphael's failed attempt to return to himself, to the painter who in his youth had embraced the qualities of early Italian painting. Instead of a Christ of the *Transfiguration*, however, the late Raphael had represented a Christ of the *Ascension*. Instead of an ascending movement, in time, which characterizes the *Ascension*, the correct representation of the *Transfiguration* ought to have been a motionless manifestation in space, simple and calm.[9] Raphael, therefore, had incorrectly applied the absolute signs: he used expansives, but he should have chosen horizontals along a vertical line (Pl. 12.9).

In the opinion of Humbert, both the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Indian Bacchus* were isolated instances. In 1824 he could only muster real appreciation for the former, in 1827 only for the latter statue among all other classical statues. Yet if he was so critical of classical sculptures, why did he make so many copies after them? Why reconstruct so often the original appearance of the *Torso Belvedere* (Pl. 12.8)? And if he was so negative about sculptures from Antiquity, why go to all that trouble in 1815 to secure for Leiden the collection of plaster casts after classical sculptures which King Louis Napoleon had transferred from the Musée Napoléon to Amsterdam in 1807? According to Bodel Nijenhuis, Humbert's motive was to make sure that young students who were 'thoroughly grounded in the classical authors on art, might also be able to practise that art by copying and studying it'.[10] Why go to such lengths when classical sculpture failed to make the mark according to him? Is it possible to ignore that in this case yet another radical change of opinion occurred, this time at the expense of classical sculpture? Did the above-mentioned donation to Reuvens not already imply such an altered view?

In yet another respect do we find an insurmountable gap between the 1824 lecture presented to the KNI and the *Essai* that was published three years later. In the earlier text, Humbert had passed a favourable judgement on the amphibious merging of painting and sculpture in the *Apollo Belvedere*, whereas a few years later he showed himself to be an advocate of a rigorous division between the arts. In the *Essai* he appears to detect a tendency towards a convergence of the several arts since the Greeks, a tendency which he sharply rejected.[11]

There is also a note of unpredictability in the incomplete character of the *Essai*. It was published unfinished in 1827, but the revised version of 1832 likewise remained uncompleted and the meagre addition of 1839 did not really redress the balance. The book which Humbert had in mind never actually appeared, and what there is, is less than a compromise. The substantial part which he called *Medusa*, was not included in the end. Although he had often read it through with satisfaction, he came to the conclusion that he had not quite fully considered the sort of beneficial relations which the three arts were able to bring about between man and his God.[12] The crisis which had hit Holland following the separation of north and south in 1830 motivated him to reject the *Medusa* and include instead an appendix on the Lion on the Coast, *Le Géant de la Côte, symbolisant La Hollande* in 1832 (Pl. 12.12 and 12.13). He urged the installation of this lion, a reclining, basalt statue of gargantuan proportions, before the coast near Katwijk. Once the Netherlands had been devoured by the encroaching seas, the animal would still continue to testify to the country's heroic past.[13] Here Humbert suddenly manifested himself as an admirer of the Dutch nation, which previously never had his interest. And while in the *Essai* he preferred to have the lion rendered from the side and his drawings invariably show the animal frontally or in profile, the statue of the lion that was to be erected near Katwijk is shown obliquely from the side in a comprehensive, separate large format watercolour.[14] It seems there was no end to his unpredictability.

At the risk of being excessive, I would like to offer a final example of a radical shift in Humbert's views. The two funerary monuments in Leiden's Pieterskerk in which Humbert was involved, are highly diverse in nature. The memorial for the versatile scientist Sebald Justinus Brugmans shows a high, soberly designed pedestal carrying the bust of the deceased, prominently decorated with his several distinctions. The funerary monument for the jurist and statesman Joan Melchior Kemper is of a stern simplicity, has no bust and

only the single line *Kemperi grati discipuli* reveals who is being commemorated (Pl. 12.15). Brugmans and Kemper, who died respectively in 1819 and 1824, both headed Leiden University at some point. Brugmans steered the University through the Batavian-French era, which is exactly why he had to make way for Kemper, one of the champions of the revolution of 1813 who helped shape the new and independent kingdom of the Netherlands.

The monument to Kemper was unveiled in 1835, but the year in which the memorial for Brugmans was completed, is unknown. This memorial has a curious history. Already in his funerary address held shortly after Brugman's death, Johan Willem te Water, then chairman of the Maatschappij der Letterkunde (Society of Dutch Literature) in Leiden, pleaded for the erection of a dedicated monument in Pieterskerk. After that, however, nothing is heard of the matter for decades. In 1846 the Amsterdam man of letters Jeronimo de Vries mentioned in passing that the monument had been executed by the sculptor Paul Joseph Gabriel. In 1849 Bodel Nijenhuis reported that Humbert had provided a suitable design for it, without, however, referring to Gabriel, and in 1855 van der Aa mentioned in his dictionary of biography that the monument had been commissioned by Brugmans' brother, the lawyer and senator Pibo Brugmans, without alluding to either Gabriel or Humbert. Only in 1957 were all three parties involved named in connection with this monument for the first time. The full facts of the case remain unclear and as for the dating, van der Aa referred to 1829, while Kneppelhout decided on 1825. The only thing we can be sure about is that the monument was there in 1832, as an anonymous visitor of Pieterskerk mentioned it in the *Arnhemsche Courant*.[15]

We may, however, assume that the design already dates from before 1828. In the absence of Humbert, a memorandum was read at a meeting of the KNI on 29 October 1828 which he had submitted to the committee responsible for erecting the monument to Kemper. In this memorandum Humbert stated that any memorial, regardless of the person for whom it was to be made, should possess permanence and be generally intelligible. Preferably cut out of a single piece of marble, it was to be nothing else than a simple, striking memorial in monochrome, based on Greek or Egyptian models, without the encumbrance of metaphor or symbolism. Humbert illustrated his point on the basis of the design for Kemper's monument, not that of Brugmans.[16] The former is also far more suitable, as the bust of the monument to Brugmans has no place in this argument. It appears that between 1819 and 1828, Humbert drastically changed his view about the way a memorial should be shaped, turning it into the direction of abstraction.

Humbert was surely an unpredictable man, but he was no less versatile. Are these qualities not two sides of the same coin? Humbert combined an eye for the mundane with a penchant for the visionary. The former is testified by an endearing drawing of a prostrate dog, of which we can only hope it is asleep (Pl. 12.5), the latter by his momentous watercolour on the subject of Moses experiencing on Mount Sinai how the Ten Commandments are engraved in the stone tablets (Pl. 12.17).

12.1 HENDRIK VOOGD

Portrait of Humbert de Superville

Early on in his career Humbert won a scholarship to Rome, where he stayed for about ten years. In Rome he shared a house for some time with the landscape painter Hendrik Voogd, who made this portrait. While in Italy Humbert lost many drawings, which he only recovered decades later, partly thanks to Voogd, who remained in Italy and died there.

pencil, 183 x 145 mm, PK-T-2089

12.2 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

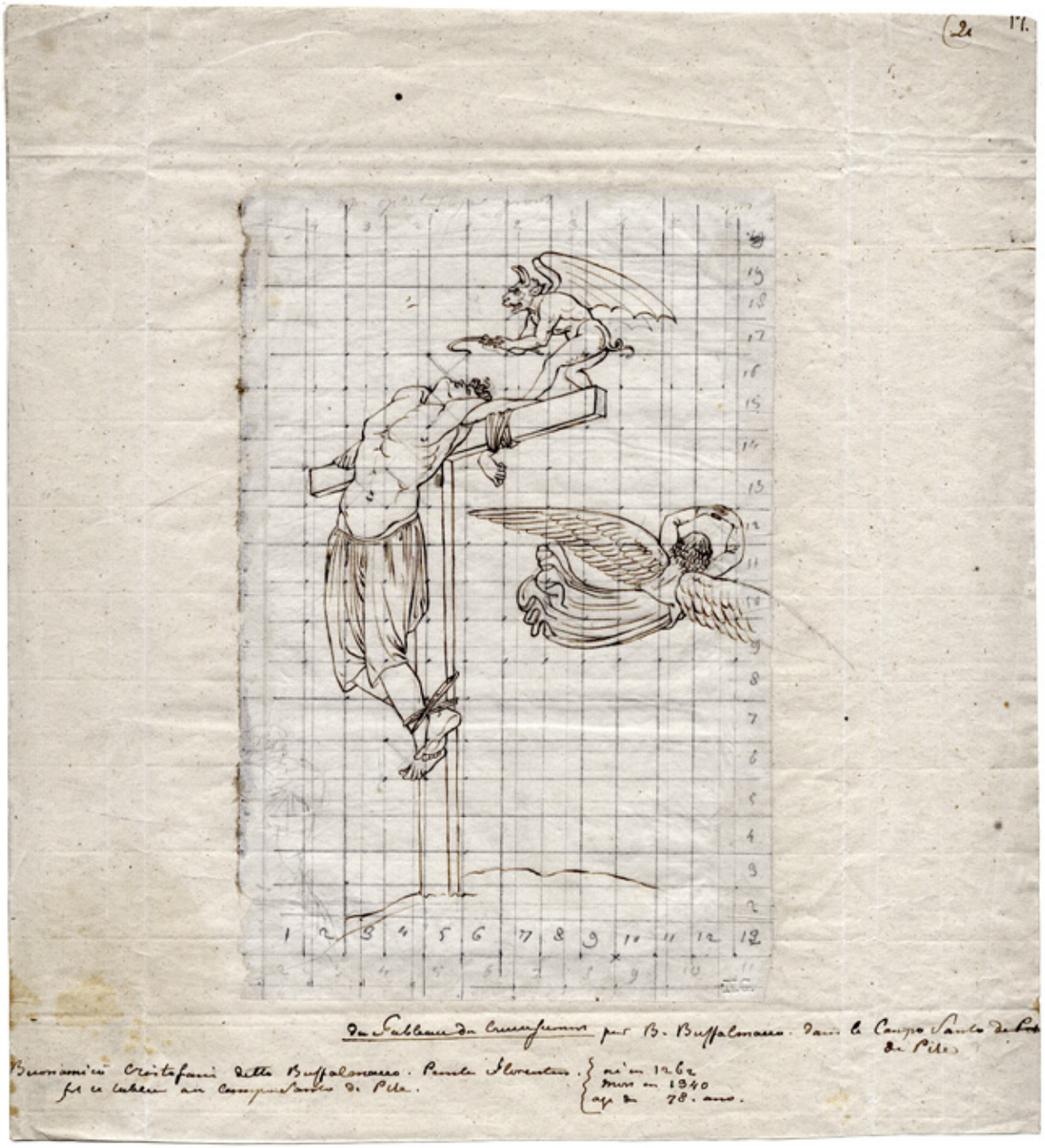
Winged Demon

When Humbert was living in Italy, he travelled across Tuscany and was one of the first to take an interest in Trecento mural paintings. Accordingly he also made drawings after the frescos in the Campo Santo in Pisa. After he had returned to the Netherlands, he availed himself of reproductive prints which he had acquired for the Print Room for his own drawings after these frescos. At the time many of these frescos, a considerable number of which were destroyed in World War II following the bombing of Pisa, were still optimistically attributed to Giotto on Vasari's authority.

after a Print by Carlo Lasinio of a Fresco on the Campo Santo in Pisa, formerly attributed to Giotto, pen and grey ink, watercolour, 427 x 278 mm, PK-T-1211

12.3 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

The Impenitent Thief and an Angel, Details of a Crucifixion



Among Humbert's acquisitions for the Print Room was the impressive series of prints made by Carlo Lasinio after the frescos in the Campo Santo at the end of the eighteenth century. Hardly anything is known about Buffalmacco, to whom a number of these paintings were attributed in the wake of Vasari. There are, however, still art historians who wish to follow Vasari in this attribution.

after a Print by Carlo Lasinio of a Fresco on the Campo Santo in Pisa, formerly attributed to Buffalmacco, pencil, pen and brown ink, 313 x 291 mm, PK-T-1364

12.4 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

Seated Angel, Hiding His Face in His Arms

While he was staying in Rome, Humbert sided with the French in the conflict between the French Republic and the Vatican, which was supported by the Kingdom of Naples. The Neapolitan army prevailed, and Humbert was arrested. He was held prisoner in Civitavecchia for about a year, during which enforced stay he made numerous drawings, some of which were inspired by early Italian painting. This signed and dated pen drawing of a seated angel falls in this category.

pen and grey ink on black chalk on blue paper, 179 x 105 mm, signed: Giottino Humbert f., with the note: Civitavecchia An.7, PK-T-1148

12.5 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

Lying Dog

It is unknown whether this drawing was made after life or after a model, nor does it tell us whether the dog is asleep or dead. Whatever the case may be, Humbert demonstrates that he definitely had an eye for the world around him. He may have been unpredictable, an eccentric and a visionary, a man who had his stern moral verdict ready on any number of subjects, but he also had the power to move. The drawing recalls the poem by the Dutch poet Jan Hendrik Leopold, in which Jesus sees a dead dog that evokes disgust in everybody else. He shames all bystanders simply by saying: his teeth are as white as pearls.

pen and brown ink, 89 x 143 mm, PK-T-681

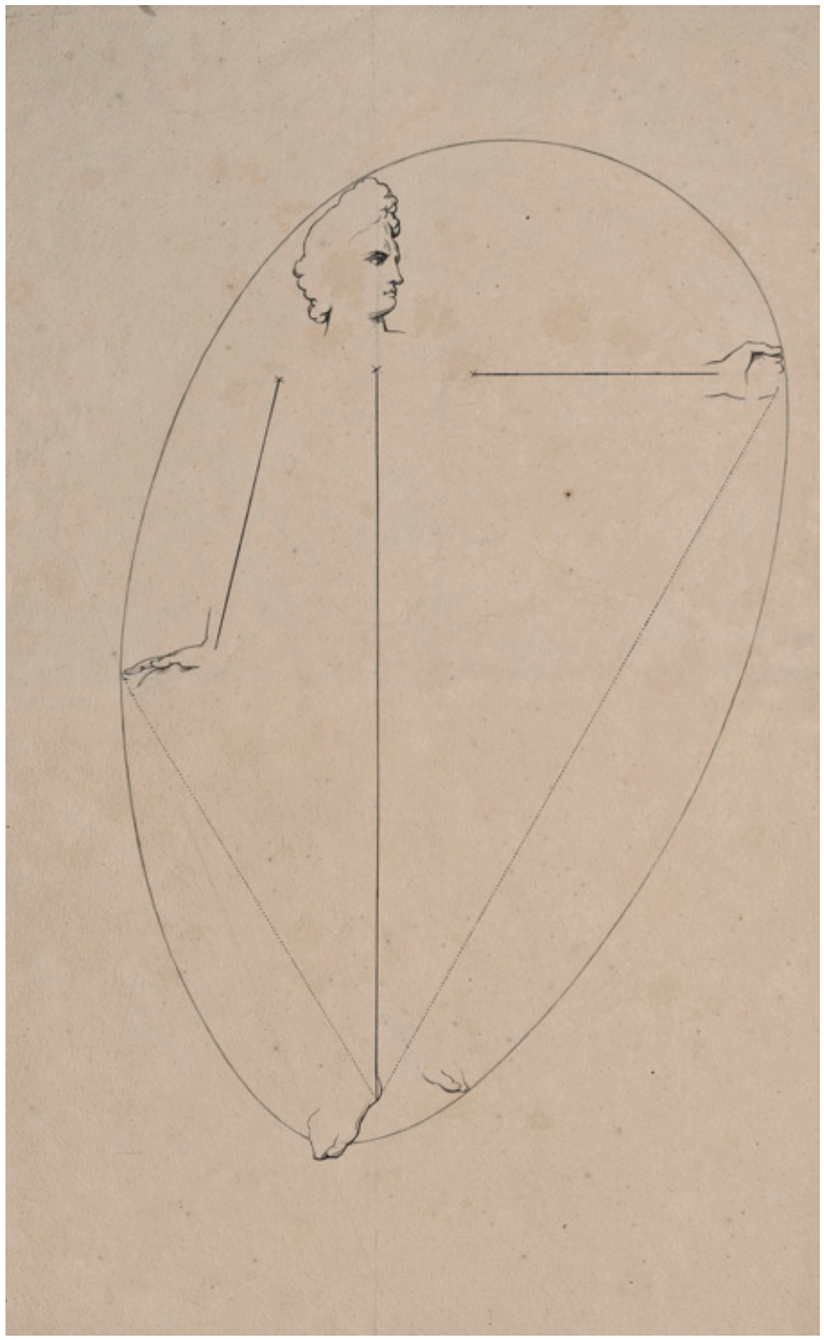
12.6 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE
‘Poetical’ Silhouette of Apollo

Humbert was a versatile artist, but he was a draughtsman before anything else. In his numerous drawings he often chose an original approach. He regularly created buildings, but also figures like the *Apollo Belvedere*, solely from chiaroscuro contrasts, often viewing them from an extremely low angle. He was ahead of his time in the degree of abstraction, thereby preceding later developments in art history. Leiden’s collection of plaster casts, which had been in Humbert’s care since 1825 but which he had already described in a catalogue eight years previously, boasted a copy of the *Apollo Belvedere*.

pen, grey wash, squared, 642 x 491 mm, signed: D.P.G. Humbert de Superville, del. / KNI, PK-1984-T-106

12.7 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

Sketch of the Apollo Belvedere



Humbert regularly held lectures for the Koninklijk-Nederlandsch Instituut van Wetenschappen, Letterkunde, en Schoone Kunsten, the predecessor of the KNAW of which he had become a member in 1822. In a lecture of 1824 he praised the *Apollo Belvedere* as embodying the mystery of art, which is capable of lifting man above himself. In the course of the years Humbert studied the sculpture from several angles, but he illustrated the lecture itself with sheets that could be viewed from a distance and were meant to demonstrate the ideal proportions of the statue of Apollo.

pencil, pen, brush and grey ink, 941 x 628 mm, PK-1984-T-121

12.8 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

Reconstruction of the Torso Belvedere, Front and Sideways

As Humbert is known to have made several comments both on the *Apollo Belvedere* and on a number of other statues from Antiquity, we can expect to encounter them in his drawings. For anyone only acquainted with his written work, however, it may come as a surprise to find that he made so many drawings after another classical statue which, as the name already indicates, was once placed in the Belvedere, the *Torso Belvedere*. In various drawings Humbert tried to approximate the original appearance of this torso. Is it a sign of particular pride that he added all his initials and the statement *invenit et delineavit* to his attempts at reconstruction?

pencil, pen and brown ink, 270 x 230 mm, signed: DPGHdS. inv. et del., PK-T-610

12.9 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

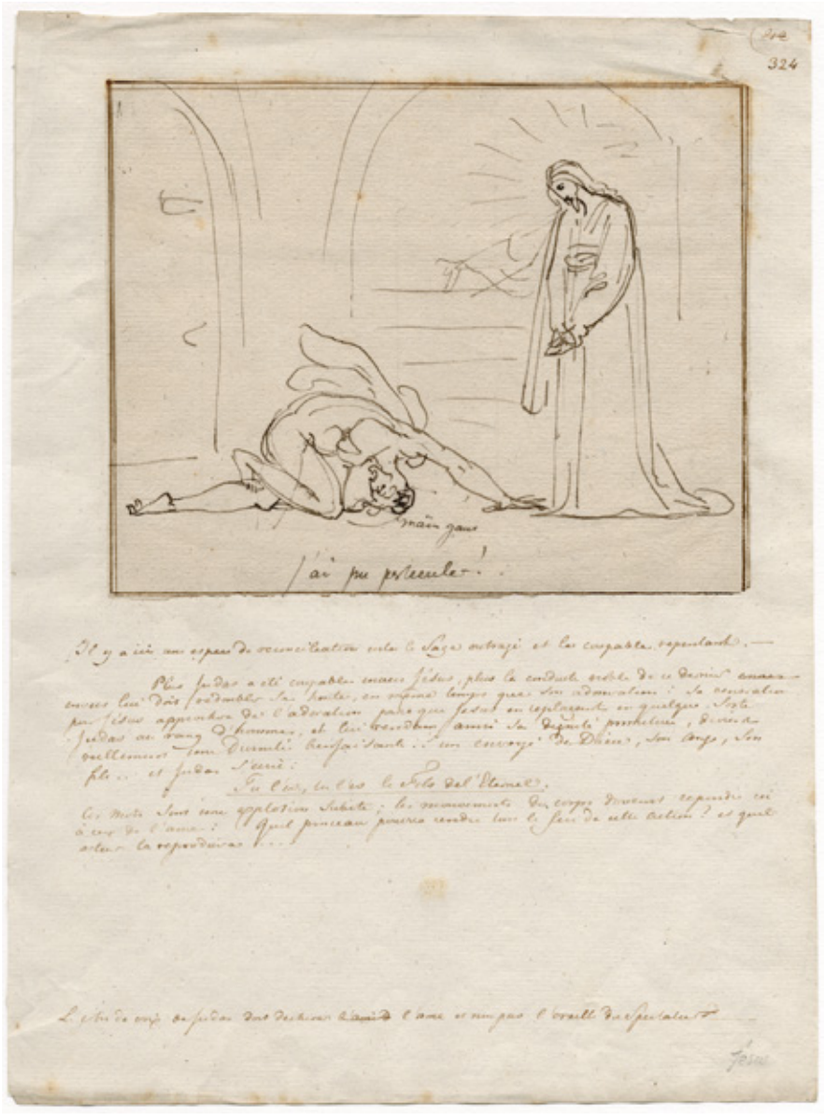
Christ, after Raphael's Transfiguration

Humbert published his *Essai sur les signes inconditionnels dans l'art* in 1827. This essay is based on the assumption that nature, man included, is characterized by what Humbert called absolute signs. He —distinguished horizontal lines, obliquely ascending lines (expansives) and obliquely descending lines. The horizontal lines expressed equilibrium and calm, the expansive ones joy and movement, and the obliquely descending lines sorrow. Humbert criticized the celebrated *Transfiguration* because Raphael had used the wrong signs. In Humbert's opinion this episode was marked by equilibrium, but Raphael had chosen to employ expansive lines.

pen and brown ink on transparent paper, 158 x 123 mm, PK-T-695

12.10 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

The Penitent Judas with Jesus in the Dungeon



In 1812 Humbert published a draft of a dramatic play entitled *Jésus*, which appeared in its final version in 1815. Several drawings are directly related to this play, which is not reputed to act well on stage. This drawing, which shows the penitent Judas throwing himself in despair at the feet of the incarcerated Jesus, demonstrates the freedom which Humbert took in his drama with respect to the events as narrated in the gospel. What the drawings do not reveal is that Humbert portrayed Jesus in his dramatic play, at least in the opinion of his contemporaries, as a follower of Immanuel Kant, who had died some years earlier.

pen and brown ink, 125 x 157 mm, PK-T-3569

12.11 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

Rocky Landscape ... sans doute Golgotha

Humbert's 1812-1815 drama about Jesus presents Judas as a man scheming to get control of Judea and who betrayed Jesus out of fear that he might prevent his plans. When Judas regrets his betrayal, he conspires to set Jesus free. He also involves in his plan Barabas (who was to be released at Pesach instead of Jesus), Kedar, the penitent thief on the cross, and Bezec, a follower of Caiaphas. Bezec, however, divulged the plans to the high priest. This drawing is Humbert's design for the setting of the play.

pen and brown ink, 172 x 127 mm, PK-T-3567

12.12 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

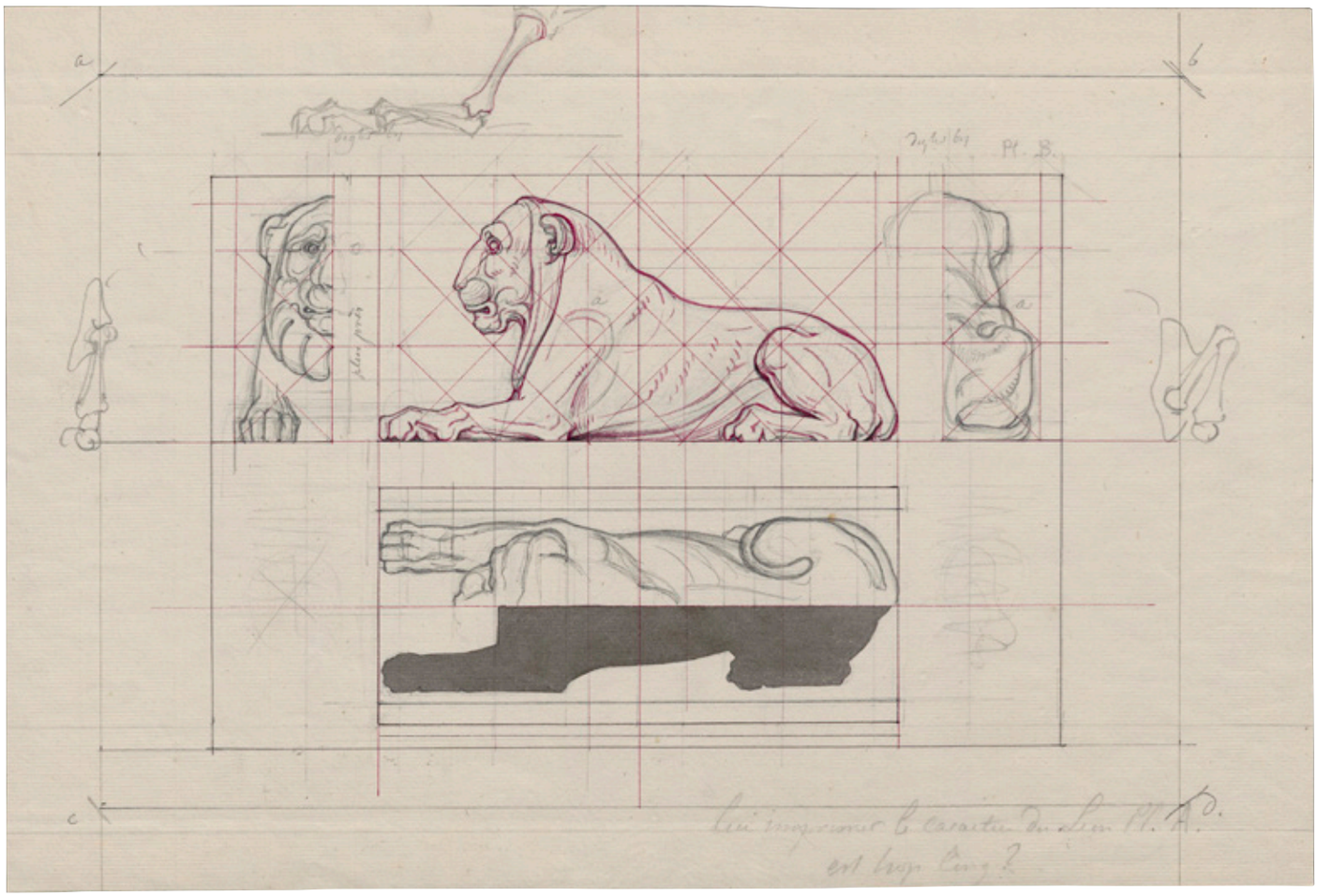
The Lion on the Coast of Holland: Colossal, Reclining Lion

In the *Essai* that was published in its still unfinished form in 1827, Humbert wrote that no sculpture could ever be eloquent that did not have large dimensions. Humbert spent a lot of time completing the *Essai*. To put it in medical terms, his alterations do not so much amount to plastic surgery as they do to amputations. He cancelled entire parts, but in the years 1830-1832 he at last added something, an appendix including a design for an immense lion that was to be placed before the Dutch coast. The accompanying text makes clear that the plan was a symptom of Humbert's suddenly erupting nationalism. Apparently this chauvinistic sentiment in Humbert was motivated by the separation between the Netherlands and Belgium in 1830. The robust format of the image suggests Humbert may have made it to illustrate a lecture.

black chalk, watercolour, mounted on cardboard, 672 x 1020 mm, PK-T-1542

12.13 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

The Lion on the Coast of Holland, Shown from Various Sides

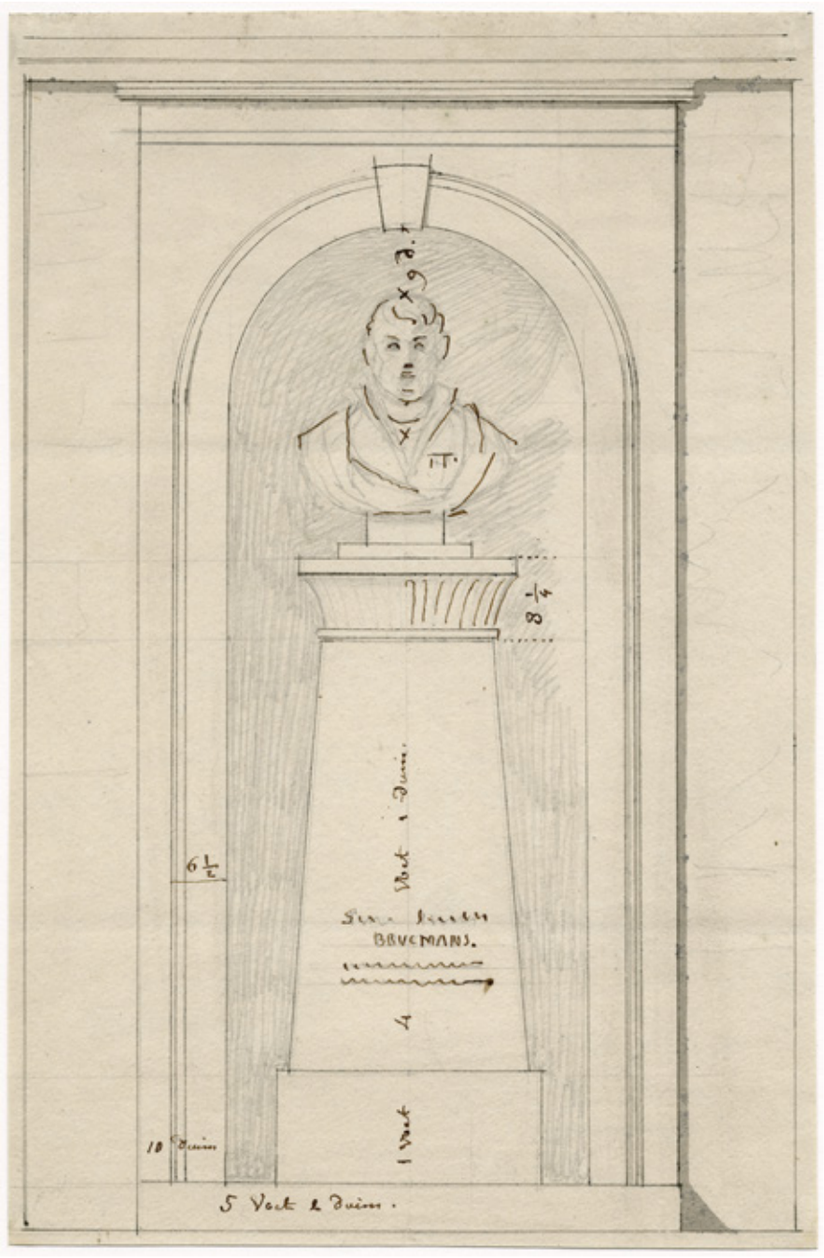


Many of the drawings and manuscripts by Humbert in the Print Room relate to a wide variety of projects which only have in common that they were never executed. The basalt lion which was to have symbolized a perseverant but vanished Holland before the coast near Katwijk, likewise never materialized. Humbert's thoroughness did not only cause him to view the animal from several angles, but even consider his skeleton. The animal was to have risen to a height of some twenty-eight metres, surpassing the Sphinx in size. Can Humbert have seriously contemplated the realization of such a colossus in the sea?

pencil, pen, purple ink, grey wash, squared, 288 x 426 mm, PK-1984-T-168

12.14 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

Design for the Funerary Monument of S.J. Brugmans

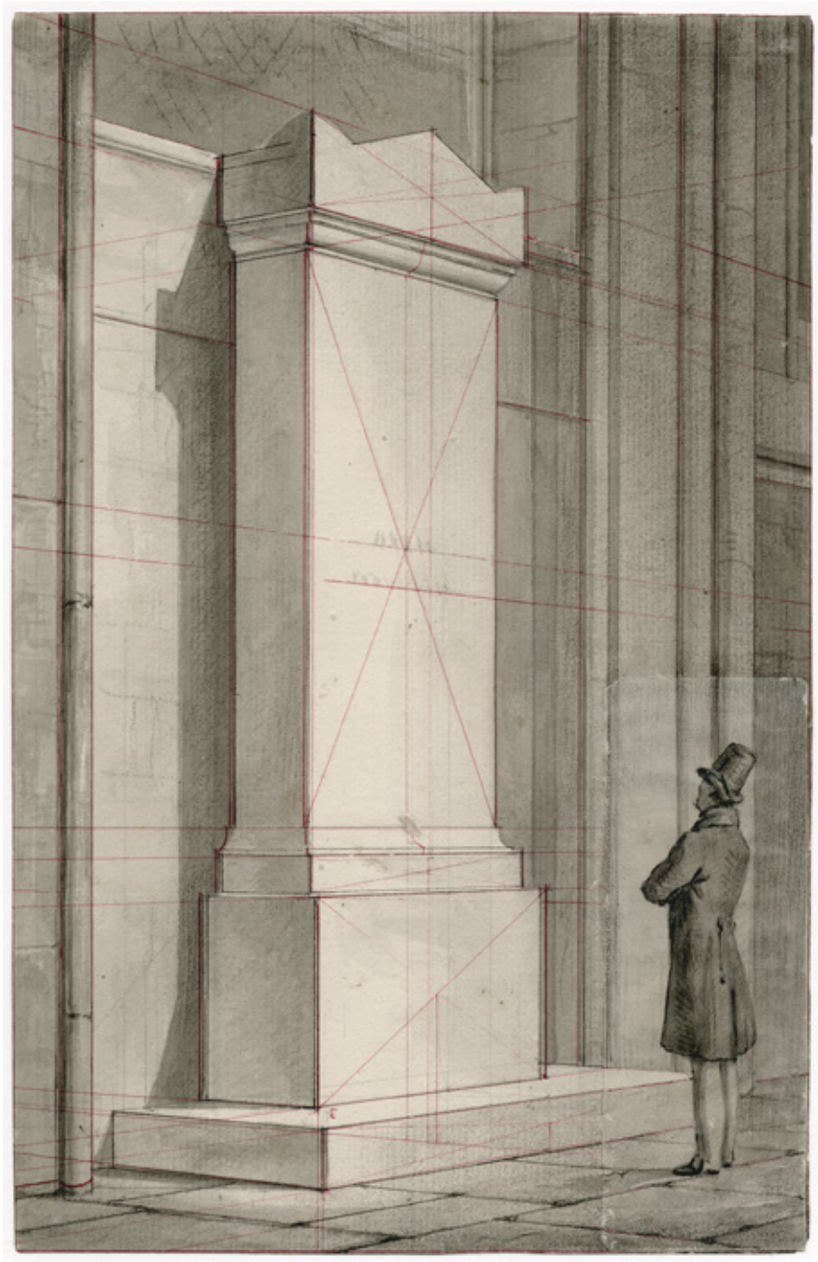


In the obituary of Humbert which he wrote shortly after the latter's death, Bodel Nijenhuis observed that Humbert had provided a 'suitable design' for the funerary monument of Sebald Justinus Brugmans († 1819). It is the main reason why this design sketch is attributed to Humbert. It is unclear when exactly he produced this drawing for the monument, which must have been executed between 1825 and 1829. What is striking is the great contrast with the later design made for the funerary monument of Kempers, Brugmans' successor as head of Leiden University.

pencil, pen and grey ink, grey wash, 256 x 162 mm, PK-T-471

12.15 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

Design for the Funerary Monument of J.M. Kemper



In this sketch Humbert used perspective lines to optically secure the funerary monument of the statesman Joan Melchior Kemper († 1824) in the building in which it was to be placed, viz. Leiden's Pieterskerk. In a lecture of 1828 Humbert advocated permanency and general intelligibility as the main criteria for designing a monument. He demonstrated both criterions by means of his own design for Kemper's monument, which was only unveiled on 30 May 1835. Humbert pasted on to the design the drawn figure of a man in a top hat looking up at the monument with his arms crossed. This added figure does not simply indicate the scale, but also the function of the monument, which is one of contemplation.

black chalk, pen and grey and purple ink, grey wash, mounted paper, 258 x 162 mm, PK-T-472

12.16 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

Michelangelo's Moses in San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome

According to Humbert sculpture ended with Michelangelo. He had been the only genius since the Egyptians to have successfully represented man in massive forms. Michelangelo had offered the best proof of his talent in his *Moses* and yet, even in this work he had transgressed the boundaries of decorum. An important reason why Humbert copied this figure, not from the original, but from Jacob Matham's engraving after it, must have been that he carried the Tablets of the Law. Humbert had been categorical on this: it was only as the divine lawgiver that Moses was to be represented.

pen and brown ink, grey wash, 380 x 232 mm, PK-T-601

12.17 DAVID HUMBERT DE SUPERVILLE

Moses with the Stone Tablets on Top of Mount Sinai, 1831

The 1837 Annual Report of the Koninklijk-Nederlandsch Instituut refers to the 'powerful strokes' with which Humbert had earlier sketched the image of Moses on Mount Sinai. The qualification 'earlier' probably refers to 1831; the Print Room at any rate owns a robust sketch by Humbert on this subject which carries this date. The fact that Humbert so rarely dated his work makes it even more difficult to chronologically arrange his work. Humbert's unpredictability and the absence of any autobiographical material only add to the problem. In this image, which is for once dated, the visionary spirit in Humbert finds magnificent expression.

pencil, black chalk, pen and brown ink, grey wash, squared, 471 x 312 mm, signed and dated: D.P.G. Humbert de Superville inv. et fecit 1831, PK-T-1110